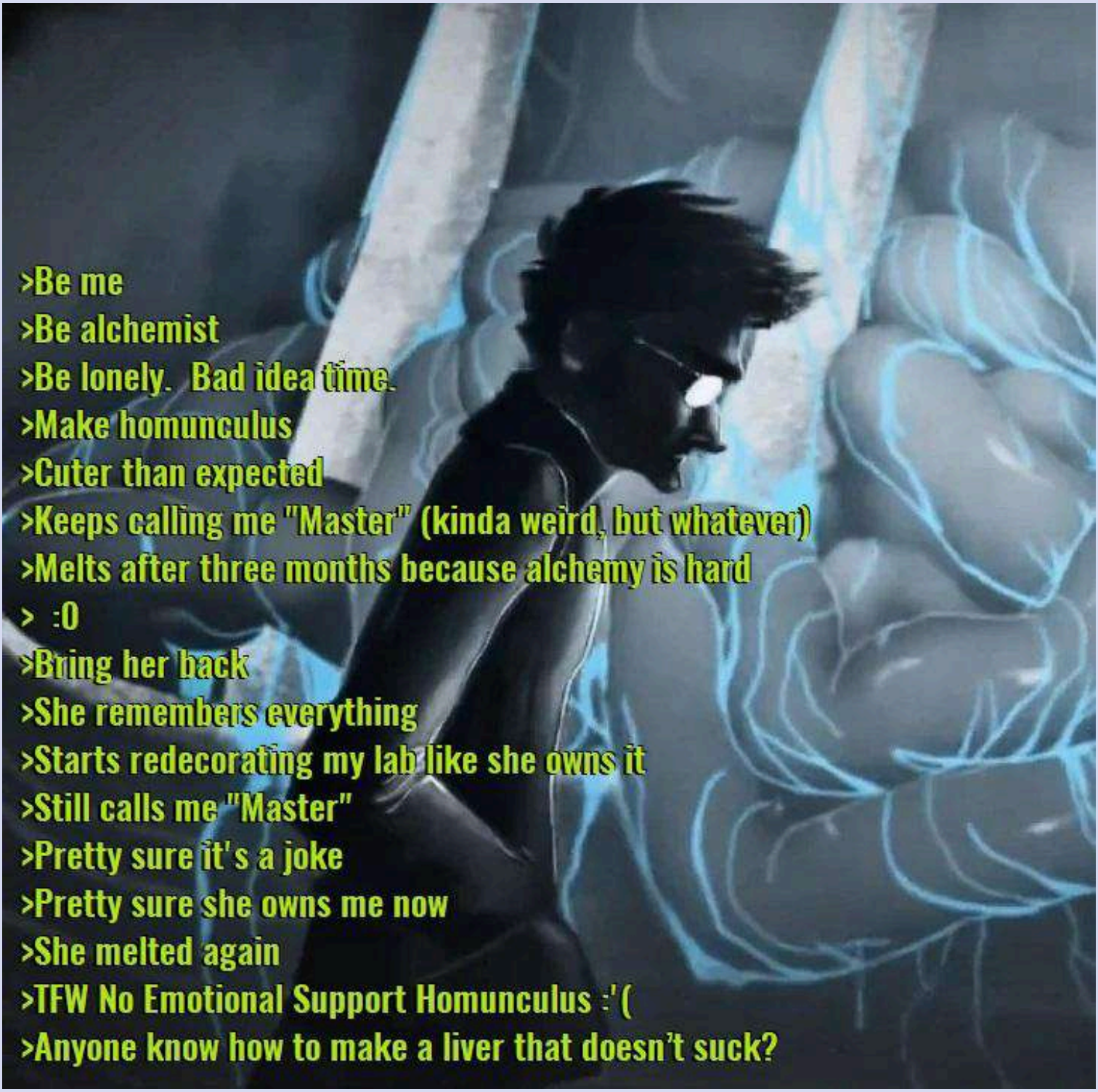

>Be me
>Be alchemist
>Be lonely. Bad idea time.
>Make homunculus
>Cuter than expected
>Keeps calling me "Master" (kinda weird, but whatever)
>Melts after three months because alchemy is hard
> :0
>Bring her back
>She remembers everything
>Starts redecorating my lab like she owns it
>Still calls me "Master"
>Pretty sure it's a joke
>Pretty sure she owns me now
>She melted again
>TFW No Emotional Support Homunculus :'(
>Anyone know how to make a liver that doesn't suck?

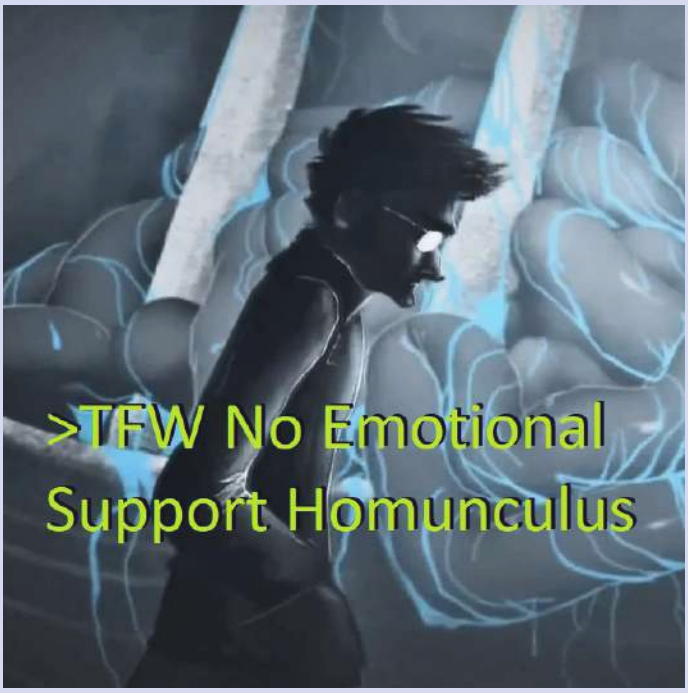
Emotional Support Homunculus

or,

(100) Renderings of Ergh

A work of fragmentary fiction in the literary tradition of /tg/.

By: Anonymous



We start with an incredibly lonely alchemist.

He begins dabbling in homunculi. The principles have been well-trod; easy to grow, hard to sculpt, harder to keep alive. Those of a grim persuasion prefer undead minions, those of an ethical bent use golems and other constructs. Neither make for good company.

Initial results aren't great. A meat-puppet: Pluripotent cells grown over bone, tubing, and metal. Hairless and pale, all-black eyes, crouches like a spider, eats bugs, drools, blinks out of sequence. Also, it falls apart over the course of seven days and has to be rendered down and re-spawned (no kidneys/liver/glands). Not the companion he was aiming for, but it had the manner of a dog that speaks.

“Like it here. Like you. Like being.”

Another iteration, more refinements. He uses morphic resonance to direct the growth, trying to give it some grace. The bones were female, and now so is it, nominally. It comes out lanky but soft, soft enough it needs clothes to not distract him. It stands up most of the time, though its posture leaves something to be desired. It still drools and eats rats it catches in the dungeon (teeth are human, but the jaws open too far, purple tongue too long).

"We want to be good for master. Is Ergh good?”

“Ergh” was a gurgle from it hawking up protoplasm, but the name stuck. It fetches, it carries, it asks questions and seems to understand the answers, the contours of its face are not-unpleasing. Also, it devours books, his modest library occupying it every moment it’s not at his heels. Textbooks. Treatises. Travelogues. Trite bodice-rippers. He puts a second chair by the fire, the big, musty one that sat too long in the under-under-basement.

It still degenerates over the course of a week; by day 6, unstable and delirious, day 7, it's leaking goo and in obvious discomfort. **“Everything…blurry. You, face. Book, words. Us, inside.”** He renders it down and doesn't spawn a fresh one for a while. But damn is it lonely in a dungeon lab beneath an abandoned manor in a haunted forest in a cursed kingdom. Reading of an evening becomes unbearable, as he looks to the chair by the fire where Ergh isn't.

He comes up with a procedure that'll turn the one-week lifespan into maybe a month, extracting and filtering the humors, topping it up with fresh vitae-matter. Still has to get melted down and re-grown eventually. Memories, or impressions of them, carry over between renderings; he isolates cranial fluid and uses it in the next iteration, going back to the first gangling horror.

It drools less, its posture improves. One night, it finds a book of woodcuts, ladies posing in expensive dresses, faces lovingly detailed. Ergh looks from the pages to its reflection in a beaker. The alchemist watches.

“No lines over eyes”

>I tried giving you eyebrows once, but you wound up with fingernails growing out of your eyesockets. Silly of me, I always over-think.

He retrieves a small wooden box, a cosmetic kit, left behind from an ill-fated tryst with a witch.

“What is?”

>Box of eyebrows. Ergh's box now

“Gift sweet, you sweet. Means you care.” It draws, wipes the black marks off, draws again. **"Ergh pretty now, Master?"**

He takes in its face, the round forehead, button nose, delicate chin. It blinks one eye, then the other.

>Ergh already pretty.

She inhales and gives him the lightest slap on the shoulder, smile radiant. **“Liar. Face works better with box. Look.”** she waggles elegant black lines. **“What say?”**

>Skeptical?

“Nooo”

>Suggestive?

“Clooose”

>...Saucy?

A grin, a nod, a bitten lower lip. She turns back to the mirror, now applying something from a tube around her mouth.

>Also, not liar.

“Are”

>Isn't

“Is”

Her tongue wipes away an excess glob of rouge.

“Red on lips tastes good. We try not to eat.”

He takes deliveries of fresh books, she asks for volumes on cooking, plays (bawdy farces, mostly), and dry histories of accounting practices.

“Fun to watch numbers dance. On page, in head.”

The next time she starts falling apart, he can't handle it. Tries everything, winds up keeping her alive, in pain, for a few extra days. She reaches out to him, running her fingers shakily over the back of his head, and he holds her other hand in both of his.

“Sorry. Hurts to hurt you.”

After she’s gone, he wanders around the lab in a daze. Extra candles. A shelf here instead of there. More pillows, more books. Stone walls covered in fabric. Not his work. Hers.

He starts working on a better liver.

Ergh luxuriates in a cauldron by the kitchen hearth, humming a tune this her has never heard, cleaning off the protoplasm from her latest re-birth. A purple tongue sticks out between her teeth as she rummages around in the warm, fragrant water; practical, unbothered. The alchemist enters, holding fresh linens, averting his gaze in awkward politeness. Her black eyes follow him. Her tongue retracts. The rummaging pauses, then becomes slower, more…specific. A sponge floats to the surface, abandoned.

>Enjoying yourself?

He's still looking away, arranging the linens on a stool. Her eyes roll back, grey and opaque.

"Mmm, yes…" her answer floats like a soft sigh.

>Wouldn't think you'd want to spend more time in a…vat.

The sounds he's hearing make him pause, but they stop as he turns to the cauldron. Ergh looks back at him innocently. One eye blinks, then the other.

"Warmer than between." She raises a leg from the water, suds dripping from a long, narrow foot that extends towards him. **"Humors clot in small bits sometimes. Rub?"**

>Why does this feel like a trick?

"...Because is?"

The other scholars and practitioners are amused when he attends the Symposium for the Forbidden Arts with her as a plus-one. A cadaverous man with a cloak made of screaming faces sits next to them, talking around a mouthful of sweetbreads.

"*Your work really is impressive, I've never seen one with so much neural tissue. It even looks hurt that I'm talking about it like it can't hear, excellent stuff. We all have our pets and slaves, but you've really gone above and beyond. Your obvious attachment to it is a bit unseemly, though."*

The Alchemist's face turns to him like a grinding boulder.

>Mock me all you like. But you will neither speak of her, nor to her. You have lost that privilege.

A quiet ripples along the table, leaving behind a few stray chortles. The cloaked man chews, swallows. Appraises.

"Master, we should go. These people are bad. Not friends."

[Evil chortling intensifies]

Underneath the table, her hand takes his, squeezing gently. A severe woman with a veil covering her lack of eyes she doesn't need speaks of patronage in a patronizing tone.

"If you can culture compounds of such quality, I know a sorcerer who's always looking for medical serums. Henchmen need a health plan, and excruciated prisoners need to survive excruciation. Apparently his keep bleeding out too soon."

The pair look to each other while a thumb caresses a palm, unseen. Ergh shrugs, her frown lopsided.

"Means more books? We know they not free."

"What does?"
The alchemist tests the fit of the tube emerging from a metal port on her clavicle.
>Helps you stay longer. Humors go out, are purified by the device, and returned, here.
He taps another port where a tube pierces her torso, she wriggles uncomfortably in her linen shift. Dark liquid moves sluggishly, filling the reservoir with iridescent indigo goo.
“Feels odd.”
>Ergh, odd? Nooo. That doesn’t sound like Ergh.
“Master thinks he’s funny.” Her smile is radiant. **“Calls us odd. Master odd one. Master can’t say it.”**
>Say what?
"Master knows."
>No, he doesn’t.
Ergh gives him a level gaze, tilts her head to the side.
"We love you."
>[Throat noises]
"Ergh loooves you." now she's enjoying herself
>...
"Hmmmm?"
>…you already know I…I’m deeply fond of you.
"HA! Ergh right. Master can’t say. So many more words than us, but not that one."
>One moment, I need to get-
"No." As he begins to step away from the table, a hand snakes out to take his arm.
"Stay with us. Until done."
>Of course. Hold my hand.
He retrieves the heavy syringe from a table just within reach of their two-person chain, the contents milky.
>There, I’m with you. This will...fill in any gaps in you. Fresh flesh.
"Pluripotent Animalcules?"
>Y-Yes.
There's a genuine smile in his voice.
>You ran out of bawdy plays?
"Saving some. Read together, Master better at voices."

Ergh checks her eyebrows again in an alembic, adjusts her robe to barely cover her narrow shoulders. She’s done what she can with it; extrapolating from the woodcuts of elaborate gowns. It falls open scandalously as she bends down, one elbow on the table, chin in her palm, as she watches him work.
“Clever fingers. Good for titrations.” A smile leaks into the words.
>Good thing too, it’s tedious work, I’d hate to have to start over. Could you pass me the-
His eyes drift laterally, then bulge. A bead of liquid falls from a dropper, making a curl of green smoke rise as it eats a small divot from the wood of the table.
He turns his head to find their noses almost touching. She lets the moment stretch. He doesn't look away. Finally.
“We want you.”
>Uh….ah…I…you mean…abed?
“Here, Floor. Now.”
>Uh, what about rug? By the fire?
“We compromise.”

They awake to a thunderous noise from above. Ergh bolts out of the bedroom on all fours, leaving the alchemist disheveled, thrashing about in tangled sheets. He clutches the muscles above his hips as they ache. He smiles for a moment, remembering why. Pulling on clothes, he finds her peering through the heavy door to the first basement floor.

“The smokepowder and metal balls trap.” The air is a mix of sulfur, grit, and a growing charnel odor of exposed innards.

>Godsdamned adventurers. Are any of them still alive?

“One was. Then guts fell out. Why they come?”

>Duke Revulsio wanted gas canisters that could be built into ballista bolts. Like a proud idiot, I put my maker’s mark on them, wound up a side-quest for every vagabond trying to take down the bastard. There’s a certain kind of sellsword that follows any paper trail, no matter how inane.

“Ergh move bodies? Take stuff, put rest in vat?”

>They’ll keep. Breakfast first.

“Ergh make fritters!” she scampers away, on two legs this time.

It’s a cozy evening before the fire. The alchemist yawns and stretches.

>I feel like turning in. Ergh, would you like to be abed?

Ergh squats in her armchair, holding a book at arm’s length as her eyes track across it ravenously.

“...We learn about Salt-Peter.”

>You…don’t…want to be…abed?

He’s nonplussed.

“Oh, that. We play with Master later.” She judges the remaining thickness of the book**.**

“Tomorrow. Peter has many uses”

>Oh…good, actually. I-I’m a bit sore.

“If we want a break, we wake you up.”

Another re-gifting. It's become a ritual, like the refreshment of her humors

>Now you can give yourself eyebrows.

"How many times?"

>What do you mean?

"We've done this before, the gift, your sweetness. How many times?"

>...at least six.

"What are we to you?"

>...

He can’t answer. Her eyes look hurt. No, worse: Disappointed.

“Why are we here?”

>...Every time, I swear I won't bring you back again. Then I break my promise. I always miss you too much.

“Your promise is selfish. We want to stay.”

>It hurts me when you go.

“We melt. Every time. Lose you. Every time. Still want to stay.” She glares, arms crossed, half pouting, half hugging herself. **“Ergh didn’t get to choose to be. Ergh gets to stay.”**

Ergh chirps—something between a gasp and a purr. Then silence.
“Thank you, Master.” She flops on her side, curling up in profound satisfaction.
“Ergh done.”
The alchemist wipes his mouth.
>But I haven’t-
“Ergh. Done.”

"We found her. In storage, under the acid-trap room."
The alchemist doesn't look away from his work, but he winces. Shit
>Found who, my dear?
"Me. An old me. Head cracked open and empty. Floating, in a big jar. What happened to her?"
>I...I extracted your essence and kept the body for study. You had started decaying,
“But wasn’t gone yet”
>You said yes to it! If it would help you ‘stay’ next time, yes.
“She said yes to be studied. Not to stay in jar forever.”
>Things in jars get studied! I've learned so much since then, gotten so close to a working nephritic organ. Next time-
"Put her in the ground. Or melt her. Please"
>It's not you.
"We know. She's an old meat puppet, a broken toy."
>That's unkind to both of us, Ergh. You're the culmination of years of work, mine and yours.-
"WE WANT HER TO REST."

Sometimes, Ergh collects all the linens, furs, and quilts she can find, and makes a piled nest of them before the fireplace. They spend most of the day there together. A long, slender arm reaches out from the pile, grabs a chunk of cheese from the platter nearby, then retracts.
“Our favorite spot”
>Why?
“Not sure. Something nice happened here, we think. Like being close to it.”
>Ah, the first time-
“We had you. That’s it. She was lucky girl.”

Ergh creeps through the manor basement, left intentionally abandoned-looking to deter peddlers and missionaries. She pounces—long arms flashing out to snatch something small, squeaking, and full of humors.

“Got you, sweet thing.” she whispers.

Outside, three figures—scapegraces all—do their own creeping in the last light of evening.

“Those goons in the spiked armor come round sometimes. Bringing or taking outlay. Must use this place as a cache.”

A young woman in a shawl and tall, well-worn riding boots heaves open the heavy cellar doors.

Inside, Ergh’s jaws open too far, easily accommodating the entire front half of the rat. As the woman lifts her lantern, its beam catches something hunched among the broken wine racks. It wears a black wool dress, slit just high enough for it to perch on its haunches. As the light falls over it, it turns to face her—skin the white of beachstone, blood smeared across chin and jaw, lips parted in a soft ‘o’. In its clasped hands, it holds a wet lump of grey fur.

It smiles cautiously. The teeth are human, but stained red.

“You want?”

It proffers the other half of the rat.

The woman takes in the scene for several long moments. The thing winces as it continues to proffer the rat, unsure how to proceed.

Calmly, she sets down the lantern, closes the cellar doors, picks the lantern up again, and turns away, begins walking.

“This place is cursed. We’re leaving.”

“But Edith, we haven’t—” a young man a frilly shirt objects. Someone sleight of indeterminate sex and indeterminate hairstyle eyes the cellar door in concern.

Edith doesn’t stop, just speaks over her shoulder.

“We’re leaving.”

Her tone brooks no argument.

>I worry you should hate me.

“Don’t”

>I’m not sure you can. Your nature-

“Can. Did.”

>Oh…when?

“When you waited. Want to be with you. Need you to come back. Not fair that we need you for that, and you wait. Hurts to exist at your whim.”

>That’s fair, I did ask…I didn’t know quite how lonely I was until I had you in my life. At particularly dark moments I’ve resented you for letting me feel things I’m now…dependent on.

“Scary, yes? Your heart in someone else’s hands.”

>The only thing scarier is seeing their heart in yours.

A colleague visits to collaborate on an order of Creeping Fire for the Screaming Despot of Urgesh. The other scholar watches Ergh leave the lab, her robe swishing, then speaks, both hands resting on his cane.

“You made it for bedding, yes?”

>She's a very dear friend, and confidant, and assistant, and helpmeet. Her intellect is on par with a clever journeyman, and every iteration retains additional knowledge. She'll be mixing the sulfur compounds for the batch.

“You're not fooling anyone, I saw its arse. Lifespan?”

>Her lifespan is over sixteen months now, with bi-weekly flushes and filtering. Used to be semi-weekly for three months. The nephritic organs I made could probably go in a human with some tweaking.

Ah yes, your old, worthy work. Hard to improve the human condition when you're burning them alive for the Urgeshi, but altruism doesn't pay tithes. Does it still eat rats?

"The rat-eating remains an endearing quirk."

“And...the bedding?”

"We hear you" Ergh enters the lab, pulling a handcart of carboys. She sashays over to the men, placing a narrow, long-fingered hand on her master possessively **"The bedding is vigorous."** She smiles, eyebrows raised in feigned innocence. **"Sometimes we scream. Again, tonight, Master? When the rude man leaves?"** The alchemist’s face reddens, the other man beams, eyes twinkling with mirth. His cane taps the floor decisively.

I've come around! She's an absolute treasure.

"Want to stay with you. Sorry we can't." Clear, viscous humors leak from Ergh's eyes. They're leaking from everywhere.

>I know. I thought we had it this time, It’s been almost two years.

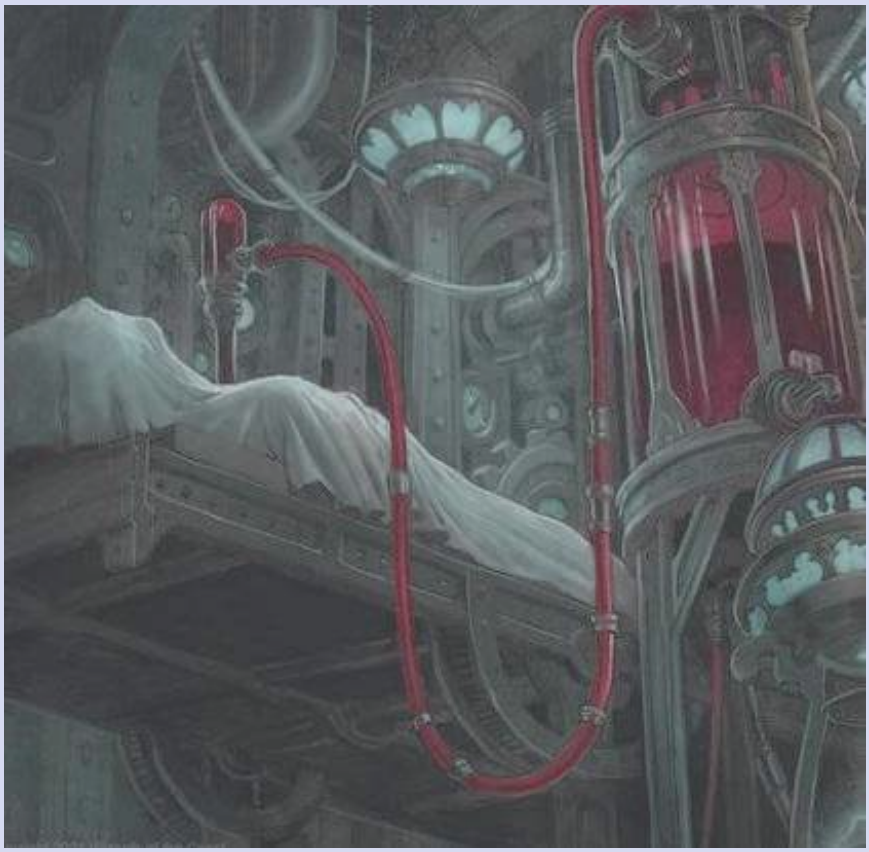
“Bring us back. No waiting like last time. You promised"

>Not until I'm sure of the new organs. They're almost perfect, more tests-

"No waiting. Waiting is worse than this. We miss you, between. We know when you wait. You change, go grey, get sad."

>I can’t do this again. I lose you, every time.

"We lose you when you wait.”



Ergh reads by the fire, the Alchemist in a chair next to her, his expression a bit distant, his grey hair going white.

>Did you do the procedure today? You need fresh aqueous vitae every-

"Every waning moon. And white bile every third. I filtered last week, no cast-off tissues, just humors."

>...I'm repeating myself, aren't I?

"You care. It's sweet." She reaches out a hand to him, he takes it and kisses it.

>Five years?

"Seven"

A weight visibly falls from his shoulders.

>You don't need me anymore, then.

Her hand caresses his cheek

Best gift. Better than eyebrows. Still want you, though. Still yours.

His shoulders continue to sag. He shakes a bit.

>You call me Master, and I know it's been a joke for longer than it hasn't been, but...I belong to you, Ergh. Ever since I looked by the fire and saw that empty chair and it hurt, I belonged to you.

She puts her forehead against his.

"I knew. I saw how you looked at me. I knew."

They remain still for quite some time.

The colleague comes calling again, his cane no longer for vanity.

"How is he, my dear?"

"He has good days."

"Is this one of them?"

"Good enough. About to be worse, though."

"Thank you—I get such perverse validation from being disliked by a woman of character. Tried for years to get your beau to hate me and never managed it. Too kind for his own good."

"Come in. Pay your respects. This is the last time, yes?"

"I think so. Traveling takes quite a bit from me, these days. I… envy him, you know. Not the embuggerance, of course—the—"

"You must be hungry. Come in. Stay, after…for a bit."

>Why is it dark and dank down here? Am I in a prison?

"This is home, Master. I'll light more lamps, bring in a brazier."

>Thank you. Uh… Miss… um… damn.

"Ergh. It's okay. We've done this before. Maybe you'd like some outside later? I'll ready the chair."

>I'm terribly sorry, Ergh.

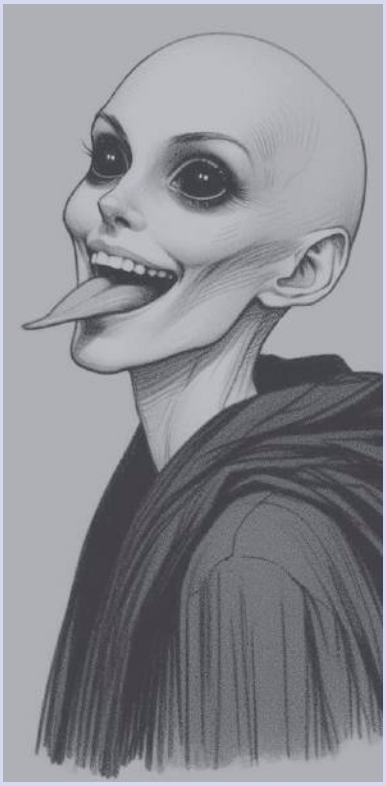
"You don't have to be."

EPILOGUE

“A pale woman came into town today with a body on a cart. Paid the priest in gold—full funeral. She’s…odd, but fancy. All in black, done up like a high-society lady.”
curious townsfolk gather in the churchyard as the coffin is covered in dirt.
“The old man...he was your father? Husband?”
She ponders the question. **"...Yes?"**
(eyes bulge in horror)
"Adoptive."
(The eyes bulge slightly less, sidelong glances are exchanged)
"He was very kind to me." She says, in a tone of defensive finality.

The pale woman with the black eyes buys a storefront in old coinage, opens an apothecary. A suitor or two sniffs around, but something always scares them off. Years pass, someone in town takes delivery of a periodical on Natural Philosophy, opens it by mistake before sending it on. It has the name on the grave in it, and hers, under <u>The Treatment and Regeneration of Nephritic Tissues.</u>

The Plague comes through, again. The town weathers it better than most, but no one hears from some outlying farms all winter. The pale woman goes out to check in the spring, comes back with a filthy, feral child. It creeps on all fours, it bites, it snarls. Under the grime is a black-haired little girl.
"You have a name, sweet thing?
"HISSSSSSSSS"
“Well, found you at the old Petkin place. You’re likely a Petkin. Records show a live birth of a Carlotta three years ago...that’s it. You’re Carlotta Petkin.”
“GRARGH!”
"Try again. Car-Lo-Ta. Cheese later if you do."
“C-carlta.”
“Good start. We work on it.”



Two women stand by the grave in the churchyard, one dark-haired, one pale, both in black (Not for the occasion, they’re just like that).
“You still miss him?”
“He gave me all his love. Didn’t keep any for himself. The first thing I remember is being sad for him, wanting to give some back. Giving makes you feel real”
A pale hand caresses the face of the woman, who puts her own over it. Holding. Swaying. Feeling.
“Glad you found something like that for yourself. Still don’t like his freckles, though. Untrustworthy.”
“You’ll forgive him for taking your sweet thing from you one day.”

A woman rests by the fire, reading, her skin like the parchment of her book. Small children play as they babble to each other, repeating the half-understood gossip they overhear. A dark-haired little boy speaks with all the authority of a four-year-old, faint freckles on his face:
"*Grandma used to be a puppet, but she got better."*
The pale woman smiles. She licks her finger with a purple tongue that's just a little too long, and turns the page.

Starring:

Mia Goth as Ergh
Adam Driver as The Alchemist
Andrew Scott as The Colleague
Sophie Thatcher as Carlotta
Freya Allan as Edith
Doug Jones as The Lich (and The Clerk)
Tilda Swinton as Josephine
Brad Dourif as the Man with Cloak of Screaming Faces

(Audio Plays over the credits)

"*So you're… Mrs. Halbract?"*
"Yes."
A pen scritches
"Eirge?"
"It's pronounced Ergh. Foreign."
"From where?"
"Not here. How much more? I have distillations that need decanting."
More scritching
"Just another formality or two. And your maiden name is… also Halbract?"
"It was Ismund's."
The scritching stops
"But—so—you married…?"
"Technically. Posthumously. Never had anyone else. We shared everything."
"I see. Halbract…nee Halbract. Foreign. Yes. Next of kin?"
"Carlotta Astrodel nee Halbract nee Petkin."
"Two nees?"
"Adopted, then married."
"And Mr Astrodel?"
"Irrelevant in this context. In my death or absence, the Shop goes to Carlotta. The Manor as well. A ruin, but land is land."
"Surely not any time soon?"
"I'm not as needed as I once was. And I've never seen the ocean."

—----------POST-CREDITS SCENE—----------

The cry of gulls. the murmur of crowds. Wheels on cobblestones. A gasp of joy. Ergh's stylish black bonnet is almost a veil, but it doesn't conceal her radiant smile.
"Remember you! Victor. The little boy who read in my shop. Hiding from bad mother and worse father. You study here, now? Natural philosophy? Not surprised by that.
>Miss Eirge? I - it's been - you haven't changed a bit!
"You have. Taller. To start. Same eyes, though." Inky orbs look up, then down, then up again. **"Ask me to stroll. By the shore."**
>Sh-should I?
"Yes." her tone brooks no argument.
A hand, pale, narrow, lightly snakes around the crook of his arm.
"Got you, sweet thing."

—----------*FIN*—----------

—----------POST-POST-CREDITS SCENE—----------

“I spent my early life living and dying and coming back again and again. Every time I came back, slowly waking up as new flesh crawled across my bones, I looked forward to seeing my favorite person in the world.

He was always so sad. And I’d cheer him up. And he loved me, and it made my goo sing.

But being loved scared him. Being happy scared him. He’d pull away, close off, like he was afraid my love wasn’t real.

And by the time I didn’t need him anymore—and he could love me without guilt—we had some time. It felt nice.

But it didn’t feel like winning.

Not like that first time I rubbed my face on his chest and said, “You smell like mine” and he sighed and melted and held me like he believed it.

That was the good part.”

The silence hangs in the dry air of the shop. A mustached man with slicked-back hair and a waistcoat stands awkwardly straight, eyes moving around like trapped animals.
"How much do I owe you?"
"Oh, for the Wormflush? Six and none."
The man places a gold coin on the counter, takes his parcel, turns 90 degrees, and leaves the shop, eyes forwards.
"You left your change! Four silver! The door opens and closes, bell tinkling softly. **Sir!?...Eh, Ergh's now."**
She tosses the coins into the cashbox.
A little boy sits around the corner against the counter, his book open but unread for some time, eyes wide.
The man steps outside into the street, looks back up at the building behind him, and shudders.
"This place is cursed."

This isn't a fantasy about creating the perfect companion. It's about recognizing yourself in someone else, someone broken in familiar ways. When you realize years later you should have either let them go or pulled them closer –and did neither.

Ergh is real enough. A composite of lovers, friends, and strays. Everything I love in other people, and so rarely find.

We don't choose to be.
We choose to stay.
— Anonymous

DVD extra from the Symposium for the Forbidden Arts

Lich [a polished skeleton in a suit and cravat, red lights in its eyesockets. His voice carries the same permanent smile as his fixed grin] : We make quite a pair, don't we? Between the two of us, there might almost be one human being.

Ergh: You used to be. Ergh isn't. Not sure we get the joke.

Lich: Humor me, my pet. I rarely get the chance to pontificate existentially to someone who doesn't just nod and smile in terror.

Ergh: Caught *that* joke. Humors.

Lich: (delighted) "Pretty and quick, my brave little goo lady. You're objectively more alive than I am. I envy you—the feel of that dress on your skin, food in your gullet, the catch in your throat when you look at *him*. Yes, I noticed. Never swung that way myself, but absence makes the heart grow fonder. Then breaks it."

Ergh [looks across the room at the Alchemist. She's nearing the point of wanting to be rescued]

Ergh: You're saying you miss not being bones?

Lich: (without malice) Yet I'm the person here, and you're the thing. No offense—I use their phrasing. Funny old world, isn't it?

Ergh: [begins considering routes of escape]

Lich: You're uncomfortable. I vaguely remember caring about people's feelings. In the sense that I enjoyed hurting them. That's one of the things you lose, though, along with taste and touch.

Ergh: Sounds lonely.

Lich: You've no idea. Pray you never do. It's driven me 'round the twist in case you can't tell.

Ergh: [awkward silence]

Lich: I do cause those, don't I?

Ergh: Cause what?

Lich: Awkward silences. Come! There's someone who's absolutely dying to meet you. My crowd views *everyone* still alive as equally beneath contempt, you're better off with the dead. Let your beau schmooze. I promise I'm the worst of us. Josephine! This is Ergh, the one you were asking about!

Josephine [a corpse, skin like an upholstered couch, perfectly coiffed hair, a frilly dress, smooth green stones in its eyesockets, carrying two wine glasses and a wooden bucket]: Ismund's plus-one? Take this, darling. So relieved for that boy, worried he was going to eventually turn up full of formaldehyde and join us, lower the whole tone. Lovely dress, but- no, please, don't do that, it's *ghastly*!

Ergh [her mouth over-full of red wine]: Hmwa?

Josephine: The wine dear, you're chugging it like a grad student. It's a hideous insult to the fruit of the vine.

Lich: Life is wasted on the living.

Josephine. Too true. [To Ergh] Spit.

Ergh: [deer in lantern-lights]

Josephine: In the bucket, sweetness.

Ergh: [spits] Why? Seems like waste.

Josephine. It's not. I'll be pouring it over myself later at home, much cheaper than virgin's blood. Now, take THIS vintage. Swirl it. Sniff it. Sip it. Taste the notes of oak and pepper. [the green stones stare hungrily]

Ergh:[slightly muffled] Pretty sure they're there. Ergh keep looking.

Josephine: Respectful *and* diligent! I'm half inclined to ask Dr. Halbract for one of my own.

Ergh [swishing ends. Her eyes stop looking at anything. Red falls into the bucket]

Josephine: Ooh, I've struck a nerve, I do apologize. That was a joke, dear.

Lich: Just in very poor taste.

Ergh: Only one Ergh.

Josephine [Looks at Lich] Ismund isn't publishing his work on pluripotent tissues anymore. Now we know why.

Lich: I believe it's called respect. Or decency. Or guilt.

Josephine: [To Ergh] He's a keeper. Just don't let the deafening silent wails of his wilting soul suffocate you.

Ergh: Did you and Master…?

Josephine: No, but ladies talk, dear.